Interview with Joss Whedon by Dietmar Dath
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The science-fiction writer Gwyneth Jones once said that the easiest way to explain a world like that, in filmed and in written science fiction, is to break things – since the characters will then have a good reason to talk about how they're supposed to work. With "Firefly" and "Serenity", you've opted for a different approach on top of that – there's a kind of interface between acting and set design which is very well done both in the show and in the film – opening the doors of their habitats by kicking them down, walking down these corridors, handling all kinds of equipment, your actors look like they've done these things for years, like they've literally lived in that environment. Do you as a director put a lot of effort into training these things, how do you work them out?

I absolutely put huge effort into this. I designed, with Carey Meyer, the designer from the show, the entire ship, and I designed it around the premise that people lived in it. This is my mission statement for everything I do: You have to experience the thing, you are there, they are there – what I was missing from science fiction, the reason I made "Serenity", was that lived-in quality of the mundane. I also happen to be obsessed with vertical space, I think it's something that takes us out of the proscenium, and, you know, science fiction had become very: "And in the Ground Hall, and on the bridge, we now have…", and everything looks like a pretty sound-stage.

The symbol of that being the George Lucas screen wipe.

Yes, exactly. It really says: oh, look, fake! And the thing I loved about "Alien" and "Aliens" – the second one especially, nobody does these things better than Cameron – was that it was designed as being lived-in. I actually came up with the kicking down of the door, it kind of made sense to me spatially that here would be the foredeck-hall and the rooms would be down.

No wasting energy by having automatically sliding doors.

They gotta open the doors. And there's a toilet – it's only blurry in the background of one shot but it's in there. Same as the washing unit. In the pilot, we actually showed it, in the movie it's just behind the postcard, I snuck it in there just to say: It's there, just so you know. It's the way I shoot as well, the lenses, I like to stay close. I have ceilings on all the sets so that you can get in and be there, I hate longe-lense movie making.

It's just done to boast: That's beautiful!

You now what: Everything's beautiful when you back off that far. I just can't stand it. I mean, there's a time for it, but you have to wait for that time. I use sort of a wide lense, look around, so we're here. The set design, the props, all that sort of stuff we do very, very carefully.

To me, you're sort of the master of close-range interpersonal awkwardness.

(laughs)

There's a scene in Astonishing X-Men #11, one of my favorite ones in the entire run, where Colossus says to Kitty Pryde, well, you're not crowding me nearly enough, and on "Firefly", there's "Objects in Space", when Kaylee asks Simon if there's nothing on the ship he could treasure – not quite communication, not quite intimacy – is this something that a career as a writer for television particularily allows you to explore and refine, because you get to do all these close-ups?

Well, you know, its funny 'cause you talk about awkwadness and he fact is I'm so terrified by awkwardness, if people make idiots of themselves or lie or somebody embarasses themselves on TV, making a speech, I still hide my eyes, literally hide my eyes because it freaks me out. Colossus saying: You're not crowding me nearly enough, that is actually him being suave and saying, hey, sure, I still like you…

But it gets you right there with them.

Well, what I tend to write is people somehow articulating themselves. Now Simon, god knows, is the master of saying the wrong thing, especially in "The Message" in front of that jar. But I love to have two people in a room, especially if it's a romantic scene, two people who just can't get their agendas lined up. I can't get away from the fact that it's a romantic scene and neither can they, and it just makes them angrier or more confused. That's why I love writing that.

Something completely different: Movie aeshetics and politics. If one believes that it is wrong to coerce people, to make them think like you do, to pacify them by technocratic means, like you very passionately communicate with this film, then what kind of responsibility does a writer/director have to allow the audience to, as you've been quoted

frequently, bring their own subtext, and how do you meet that responsibility?

The word "responsibility" is so important and so double-edged. Ultimately, you have to make a statement, you have to make a stand, you have to believe in something, as I say like, nine times in the film. And you have to stick by it. But you need to be sure that what you're saying is something that people can break apart and discuss. The fact of the matter is, I have very strong liberal, some actually radical views, that's how I was raised, that's what I believe. But a lot of very conservative people have taken this film to heart. I've read a lot of stuff by Christian writers to find out whether my work says anything to them, and ultimately it all comes down to one thing: That what we're dealing with is personal morality, personal politics. And in the personal, the statement that I'm making isn't one that anybody would necessarily disagree with, whether or not they live up to it, which is: Personal responsibility really exists. You should be a decent person, take part in what is happening.

Which in and of itself right now is a political statement, since so many decisions by comittees and corporations have nothing to do with antyhing personal – they give you a power-point-presentation, you know, it's nothing personal, but we have to do this.

Exactly.

That's the Alliance talking.

Well, you know, for me, the Alliance is what just got elected for a second term. But everybody can see it their own way – the Alliance, you know, wasn't just supposed to be this terrible government, it was a

good system which, like many good systems, became powerful, became arrogant and overreached. That's what this is. In a weird way, you could compare "Serenity" to the episode of "Buffy" called "The Body".

It isn't that "Serenity" is saying… you know, some people could say: Gosh, it's like Iraq. Well, some people are going to say: Iraq is going to be better off. Some people would say: No, it's not. We can have that argument, but one thing's for sure: A lot of people living in Iraq had their lives turned upside-down and will never be the same and were not asked. So in some senses the Alliance is America…

Could also be the European Community. There's minority and refugee issues here…

A German correspondant I spoke to talked about World War Two – you know, I hadn't actually thought about that, but I'd read about that. So the thing is: history doesn't not repeat itself. So, the reason I mentioned "The Body" is that, whereas most shows about death are like: here's the lesson, here is how we were enobled, "The Body" was really about what's it's like for the first twenty-four hours after somebody died. Just the airlessness, even the boredom of grief.

That's why Anya's monologue is the heart of the thing: I don't get it. What has happened here?

And the girl reaches out to touch her dead mother – and never does. I deliberately said: This is not cathartic, this is not healing, this is just what it's like. And people were just so moved. So many people had the cathartic experience that I was deliberately avoiding, because I was avoiding it and therefore they could say: This is what it feels like. And I didn't see that coming. And in the same way, "Serenity" isn't about whe-

ther the Alliance will ultimately make the universe a better, safer, more enlightened place. It's about the people who get pissed on by history, it's about that moment. There's been a war, and we lost it, and we got nothing. Where's our next meal coming from? Who are we gonna steal it from? Everybody can relate to that, to the person. The small moment. What I wanted to see in science fiction, what I missed, was that. So obviously I'm not going to say something that is deliberately against what I believe. But neither am I going to say something that is so much in line with what I believe that the fiction, the mythic narrative, gets lost in my polemic. That's not story-telling. That's why responsibility is such a double-edged sword, because the first thing I learned about story-telling, the first thing I ever learned from Buffy, is that the first responsibilty of the story-teller is to be irresponsible. It is to go to the place that he doesn't necessarily think it's safe to go, that he doesn't necessarily think is decent.

Killing Tara.

Killing Tara, having a sex scene with Tara. Objectifying, doing all of the things that are wrong, frightening little children – because that's where the stories come from. They come from our need to deal with these things, and if you don't go the dark place, then you have not earned the light place.

You're a writer who often thinks in terms of a mix, switches, layers, it's more about juxtaposition than about amplification. Which is where the Buffy-novels by various hands sometimes fall flat for me – they carry the wittiness of the dialogue over into the narration, they make Xander think the way he talks, and I think nobody does that. You don't do that – you have the witty dialogue, but then there's the operatic thing around that.

For one thing, I think that again is part of the mission statement: life does not proceed in one mood for two hours. There are obviously some movies which do that, brilliantly and hypnotic, I'm a huge fan of Gattaca, I'm even a huge fan of Soderberghs Solaris. But as a friend of mine said: It's a train leaving a station, and if you ain't on it, you're just gonna watch it go, 'cause you're never getting on it. And I get that. And when I see some of that done well, I applaud it. But for me, what's truly exciting about life is that sometimes you're in the middle of the worst kind of grief and along comes the funniest thing that ever happened to you. You're in the middle of something traumatic, and something very romantic happens and vice versa.

You just barely made it and then somebody dies.

Exactly. Life is a constant series of surprises. And genre gets so ossified that surprise goes out the window. To fight that, humor is a very big part of that. But it's always humour in the context of drama – which is why I stopped writing sitcoms.

You did "Roseanne", right?

Yes, and I loved "Roseanne" because it was very real, but I got tired of humour for its own sake. So when we broke stories an "Buffy", it was always in terms of the drama. You know, occasionally we would have a cool, farcical thing, they're running here and are doing this and are having fun, and that was great. But by and large, we always broke it as a drama, it was about what's at stake. And not only that, but I also forbade my writers to write funny asides in the scripts, as sidenotes. Don't write something that doesn't feel like watching it. Don't be witty to me. And

then when I put some of these in the script for "Firefly", my wife was like: "Buddy… Warning!"

About ten years ago I had the pleasure of talking to Neil Gaiman, and at one point he said: It doesn't matter how sophisticated you get with things like science-fiction, fantasy, comic books, relative to the general public, you're still in the gutter. Which sounds incredibly defeatist to me now, ten years later on, with some of the pretty good superhero films and the way that the fantastic has sort of…

It's funny, because I talked to Neil Gaiman for the first time just a few weeks ago, for TIME, and he mentioned the gutter…

So that's still on his mind… well, but I sometimes wonder whether genre as such, a place where they understand some kinds of things better than anywhere else, does even exist anymore in the sense that…

It's very interesting to me that in a way genre still is ghettoized or gutterized. I won a Saturn Award, which is a Genre thing obviously, and I was talking on stage and I said, every time you do something really good there, somebody comes up to you and says: Your work transcends the genre. I don't believe in transcending the genre. I believe in the genre. I believe that science fiction gives us great opportunities.

Everybody who made the genre transcended the genre. That's what it's for.

Does anybody say "Driving Miss Daisy" really transcended the based-on-a-play-old-lady-sitting-in-a-car-movie? Actually, I don't think it did. On the one hand, it's really frustrating to hear that kind of talk, because

science fiction really gives you the opportunity to talk about the human condition in a very specific way. In a way that can touch everybody, because everybody can remove themselves just enough to relate to everybody. If you're doing something about clam-diggers or a rap group or something that's very now, you can still say beautiful things about the human condition, but in science fiction it's be as you wanna be. What's interesting to me, I never thought of this before, but I've been having this conversation for years: Hamlet is a ghost story. Interesting to me about this: Hamlet was a ghost story when there was no stigma about being a ghost story. That was partially because people believed in ghosts, but also they realized that there was a fantastic structure to this. The very first plays were completely mythic: Everyman, Death, you know, and then there was this bend toward realism, which is jus a trend. It's a fad. Those are the people, the ones who say: High-brow drama can't have any fantastical elements, those are the people who are completey dated, completely not understanding history, making things new, coming full circle. And that's something I've just been realizing, and that's really fun in an interview. But to me, will always want to write like that.

With Stephen King or you, I always get led back to Dickens, who is not a fantasy writer per se, as the seminal …

I've said this before, he is my absolute favorite writer. I just read Dombey and Son, and it floored my. I'd never read it, because it's not really in the canon, but it just broke me, it's just so painful. And it's all about parents getting it wrong, which is my work, it's my favorite subject. I love my parents, but… Dickens is the most brilliant, romantic and fantastical, incredibly hardcore author I've ever read, and he makes live so hard on people that they become extraordinary, theit eccenriticities become magical. And this guy can drive a joke into the ground in a way

that Tim Minear can only hope to learn how, and Tim's pretty great at it. But he does it because he venerates this people for their weirdness.

And it's never condescending, even the most illiterate, strange…

The most ridiculous schmuck is absolutely his own person. And that compassion, I find it more moving than anything else that I read. And the fantastical, well- forgive me, it's been so long, but I think it's in "Bleak House" where a character spontaneously combusts…

Yeah, where all the paper is stored.

And the way he treats is, its completely accepted, very early magical realism, you absolutely accept it. It just takes it to this high level of metaphor while never leaving the impact of this thing actually happening. Well, he's a god.